

Hygiene in sprout production

Minutes of an expert discussion held at the BfR on 3 September 2012

Against the background of the sprout-associated EHEC outbreak in early summer 2011, the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) invited experts from the federal government, the federal states, trade associations and scientific institutions for an expert discussion in September 2012. The goal of the meeting was to discuss, in view of the expected regulations of the European Union (EU), what measures can make the sprout production process safer. In addition, the areas where more research on the sprout production chain is needed in the view of participants should be clarified.

In order to improve the safety of sprouts and to be able to find out the causes of sprout-associated disease outbreaks more quickly, the EU has drafted four new regulations. These regulations include stricter hygiene standards, an approval requirement for establishments producing sprouts, an EU-wide control system to improve the traceability of the flow of goods and transport routes, stricter import regulations for the products from third-party countries and a supplement to the regulation on microbiological criteria by adding a new food safety criterion for sprouts. Developing a guideline of trade associations could be helpful in the operational implementation of the numerous regulations.

Due to the damp and warm production conditions which favour the growth of pathogens, sprouts are, microbiologically speaking, a problematic food. Even microbiological controls cannot guarantee complete safety. For this reason, measures for risk minimisation must be taken throughout all production stages. Hygienic cultivation of sprout seeds is especially important. Sprout seeds for the cultivation in private households too must be sufficiently safe and must not contain any pathogens. By washing the seeds and sprouts with clean drinking water, the germ content on the surface can only be insignificantly reduced. Suitable measures for minimising the germ count of seeds and sprouts are therefore desirable. However, reliable decontamination procedures are not yet available for all seed types.

The results of the discussion are summarized in the German version (<http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/343/hygiene-bei-der-sprossenherstellung.pdf>).